

W I L T O N P A R K

TRAINING CENTRE FOR GERMAN PRISONERS OF WAR

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For nearly two years the Foreign Office have been working to de-Nazify the German prisoners of war in this country. Now, with the opening of a new school, they think they have reduced the fervent pro-Nazis by half. Here JOHN THOMPSON reports on this important experiment.

There are around 250,000 German prisoners in this country, and no one can say when they are likely to see their homes again.

For nearly two years the Political Intelligence Department of the Foreign Office have been working hard to "re-educate" these men. They are trying to ensure that when they do return to Germany it will not be as unrepentant Nazis, but as men able to become useful citizens of a new Germany.

It is clear to-day that the imaginative programme of re-education has had a marked effect on their outlook. Only one ex-Wehrmacht man in ten is now officially classified as an unrepentant Nazi. This means that the fervent pro-Nazis have been reduced by one-half.

The re-education takes place in all the prison camps, by means of lectures, discussions, instructional films, and books and newspapers.

A few weeks ago an important extension of the method was introduced. A new camp at WILTON PARK, Beaconsfield, was opened, and selected

prisoners were sent there for an intensive six-weeks' course. It was an experiment, and when the first course ended the other day it was decided that it had justified itself.

The second course has now begun, and over the week-end I visited Wilton Park to see its methods of "opening the windows of the mind" of the ex-Wehrmacht men.

The principal is a tall and energetic Oxford don of German ancestry. "You must understand," he told me at the start, "that in six weeks you can't teach a man very much. These men have been indoctrinated for years, in many cases since childhood, with Nazi and militarist beliefs. Our task is to teach them how to teach themselves - how to use their minds again.

"I call it 'pump-priming,' and the men are told they must work the pump themselves in order to become intelligent and civilised people."

This figure of speech has impressed the prisoners, and their wall-newspaper is now decorated with sprightly drawings of a pump.

There are 320 prisoners, from all branches of the German Forces, taking the course. A third are aged 25 or less, and therefore grew up in wholly Nazi surroundings, and the rest are older men.

The prisoners live exactly as they would in an ordinary camp, except that the course is conducted in a deliberately liberal atmosphere to encourage independent thought. After each lecture, criticism and discussion is encouraged.

All distinctions of rank among prisoners are dropped at Wilton Park. When they arrived some of the officers ordered privates to carry their luggage. This was jumped on by the principal. "You come here to learn, not to be soldiers," he said.

The principal led me to a small class-room where a couple of dozen prisoners sat in their nondescript uniforms discussing the Nuremberg trials.

The lecturer, a barrister, had explained the legal implications of Nuremberg and the prisoners were talking about ways of enforcing international law.

"I can understand some people being sceptical" said one lean, blond young man, "because the Nuremberg trial is the first of its kind, and people might think the verdict has been decided in advance."

An older, earnest man shook his head. "No," he said. "It is in the interest of the victorious countries to have a fair trial, for they don't wish to make martyrs of the Nazis."

Then a dark young man with a scar across his forehead spoke vehemently in support of a permanent international court. "All decent people, and I would

like to include most Germans in that, want it," he said. "There must be a start, and if it has to be with Germany, let it be so."

There was a murmur of approval. The discussion went on. Each of the pale, shabbily-clad men took his share. Some spoke in German, but most used English. As we left the classroom another middle-aged prisoner was likening the position of the Nuremberg judges to that of Mr. Trygve Lie. They owed their loyalty to the world, not to any one country, he said.

The principal explained to me the main subjects of study. Most time is given to the development of Germany during the past century. The facts of German history are new to most of the students. "Our line," he said, "is that the trouble goes back before Hitler, back to Bismarck at least."

They study British institutions as examples of the democratic system. They study international affairs. And they study the place of the individual in a free society, as compared with his role under a dictatorship.

Besides this syllabus there are other opportunities for education. There are various societies, including an art society which produced a minor political crisis during the first course.

Some prisoners had painted pictures which Hitler would have called "degenerate" because of their mildly modernist mood. Some others declared they could see nothing in them; whereupon one angry partisan asserted: "Any one who doesn't like these pictures is a Nazi at heart!"

Finally the puzzled ones asked the principal if they were really lost souls because they could not grasp modern art. He had to explain that they were perfectly entitled to their own view, providing they were tolerant of other people's.

After watching other classes at work I visited the man who runs the camp's daily news-sheet, a schoolteacher from Cologne. "I helped to run a newspaper at my other camp in Yorkshire," he told me in careful English. "At first we had a lot of trouble with the Nazis in the camps, but that doesn't happen now. All the Nazis have been segregated."

Working with him was a younger man, who showed me some of his water-colours. Some were of prison-camps and some of Hamburg, his home town. One was a picture of Yalta.

"What, were you at the conference?" inquired the principal. The prisoner shook his head with a wry smile, and said that he went to Yalta for a victory parade under von Manstein.

This man had once been a member of a Social Democratic party youth organisation. After Hitler took power, he said, they continued for a time in

the guise of a sports club, but then the leader was shot and others sent to prison.

In addition to their own news-sheet, the prisoners see most of the British papers and a weekly paper especially printed for prison camps; and they also get news of the world through films. Instructive films are shown in all the camps, by the way, and I was told that one in particular had made a profound impression - a film of the Nazi concentration camps.

This was shown to every prisoner in the country. Some of them, after seeing the pictures of Belsen and Buchenwald, tore off their decorations on leaving the hut and stamped them into the ground.

There is, I should say, no doubt that the prisoners enjoy their stay at Wilton Park, but that is not because they are "pampered." They work extremely hard, and their lives are spartan. Their rations, for instance, are half those of the British guards. They enjoy it, however, because they are men of above-normal intelligence; after months of comparative stagnation mentally the intellectual activity of Wilton Park must be immensely welcome.

"One of the striking things," said the Principal, "is their determination to learn all they can. They know they've missed a great deal, and they want to catch up."

He paused for a moment. "Of course," he went on, "the true test will be ten years from now, when we see what sort of citizens they turn out to be. Perhaps there are one or two clever Nazis here pretending that they have been enlightened. It doesn't really matter. The great majority really want to learn, and although it's a little early to judge yet, I feel convinced that here we are working on the right lines."